

# UC Berkeley

## TRANSIT

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A Conversation with Bernard Banoun

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Bernard Banoun has translated the works of numerous German writers into French, including novels and prose by Thomas Jonigk, Werner Kofler, Yoko Tawada, and Josef Winkler, and the libretti of operas by Berg, Schönberg, and Strauss. He is currently Professor of German Literature at the Sorbonne in Paris. This conversation took place in November 2009 when Banoun visited Berkeley to discuss his translation of Yoko Tawada's novel *Das nackte Auge*, published in French as *L'Œil nu* ([Verdier](#)). Kurt Beals, Erik Born, Robin Ellis, and Deniz Göktürk took part in the conversation.

*TRANSIT: When Yoko Tawada read here last year, she said that she considers her texts like a net that she throws out to see what translators she catches. What do you think of that image? How does it feel to be a fish caught in Tawada's net, and how did she catch you to begin with?*

BANOUN: Translating Tawada is a very strange and unique experience, I feel very free. She herself has a very free conception of translation, she's not an author who wants to control everything. The problem is that the texts are very intricate – many languages, many plays on words – but I never felt her texts or her person as a burden for me, which I can feel sometimes with other authors I translated.

*TRANSIT: I think the metaphor was meant to suggest that the text is something that she "casts out" – it's less a matter of capturing, but more a matter of throwing it out into the world to see what it draws in.*

BANOUN: Yes, I would say in that case that the translator works further on the net, rather than being captured in it.

*TRANSIT: Tawada often makes use of specific characteristics of the German language with a sort of alienating effect, a *Verfremdungseffekt*, that's also present in her narrators' encounters with German cities, German people, etc. Is it possible to recreate some of this experience in the French language? If there's an encounter with a particular German word or phrase that's *verfremdend*, how do you make that happen in a French translation?*

BANOUN: When the sense of *Verfremdung* comes from an encounter with the German language itself, it's impossible to make this into an encounter with the French language. There are two different levels: the level of the plot, or content, which you have to keep; and then the level of languages. Sometimes you have a play on words, and you have to keep some of that play, so that there's a confrontation with a foreign object for the French reader as well. It becomes a triangular constellation or relationship, which is obviously something else than the binary relationship between German and Japanese. Sometimes I keep some German words that I explain or translate only once, because if you translate all the German plays on words into French plays on words, the text could seem to be written in French, and the original text and context could be abolished. For instance, there's a famous essay of hers (*Erzähler ohne Seelen*) that plays on the word *Zelle*, like *Telefonzelle*, and in this text, all of the plays on words also function in French: prison, telephone booth, etc. But in the same essay, Tawada plays with the word *Seele*, which means "soul," and is also the word for a small bread in Germany. It wouldn't make sense to act as if we also had this word for bread in France. Since these two German words are

discussed in the text, you have to keep their German materiality in the translation. But a translator of *novels* translates for people who don't read the original language, so if I put in too many allusions to the German original, it would be an obstacle. The important thing is dreaming about language, or having your imagination stimulated by language. The attention of the reader is brought to the word itself – not to German, but to another language – so you have what Benjamin calls the intention on the language.

*TRANSIT: Speaking of Benjamin, who was a translator as well as a theorist of translation, we'd like to ask how you see the relation between theories of translation and the practice of translation.*

BANOUN: I began to work as a translator before I'd read any translation theory. So at first I had a typical translator's attitude to theoreticians. "They're not for me. They don't matter for the real work of the translator." Only later did I realize that translation theory can be both interesting and productive for translators. I still keep the two separate, though. For instance, when I was translating Yoko Tawada, I was also reading or rereading a lot of translation theory in preparation for a course – Schleiermacher, Benjamin, and two French theoreticians, Antoine Berman and Henri Meschonnic. I would always say to myself, "Now I have to be Schleiermacher," or "Now I have to be Benjamin," and everything I translated turned out very badly. It was confusing and inhibiting.

*TRANSIT: Could you elaborate for us on your working procedure? When you translate, do you read an entire book before starting to translate? Or do you translate as you go, word-by-word?*

BANOUN: Usually I read a book before I begin with the translation, though that's not obvious with many translators. In France there's a famous translator of Shakespeare and Dostoevsky named André Markowicz who says that he translates word-by-word so that he can recreate the writer's *Gestus*. I don't know if he really does that, but I can understand the point he's making. For my purposes, I see it differently. Maybe I'm too influenced by structuralism, but I think that a work of art has a certain coherence, and as a translator, I have to find the relationship between its various elements in order to know for instance which words, metaphors, etc. are most important. I need to be able to reproduce a certain system and certain reverberations in my translation. So I usually read the text a couple of times for comprehension. Then I make a first draft. After everything has been translated, I try to rewrite the text to give it a kind of fluency. I know that some people disagree with this approach and say that in doing that the translator adapts too much. But I think that my first drafts are as close to the text as possible, to the syntax, meaning, and images. So my translation is always rooted in the original. It keeps this foreign element. After that, it has to be a French text, a work that has its own autonomy.

*TRANSIT: If you consider your work autonomous, do you consider yourself a translator or an author? With Yoko Tawada, you collaborated a little in the creative process. For the title of the French version of Das nackte Auge, she suggested The Traveling Naked Eye, but you suggested keeping the literal title, The Naked Eye. This seems like an irreverent view of authorship – that the translator has more insight into a work than an author does, or, at the very least, a different insight.*

BANOUN: Certainly the translator has a different knowledge of a work than others. It's a view from inside the work. Sometimes you're the one who knows the work better than anyone else. But being a translator or being an author, that's something entirely different. I think that from an economical and sociological point of view, the translator has to be considered an author. Because the translator is always the author of the translation. And the original remains. Still Yoko Tawada is an exceptional case. She told me, and I feel that it's true, that there's a very strong French component in her works, even in German. It might sound quite arrogant but I think that my French translation is often a kind of completion of the German text, a realization of its potentiality. With Tawada's texts, I allow myself things that I wouldn't allow with other authors.

*TRANSIT: What metaphor would you use to describe your work as a translator. Here are some typical metaphors of translation: "changing clothing," "discovering a treasure," "cannibalism," and "vampirism." Do you see yourself in any of these?*

BANOUN: Well, for me it's vampirism but vampirism in both directions. That is, as a translator you're vampirized by the book or by the author. But you're also vampirizing. Translation is a very strong, very violent action against the text. You make the text foreign and strange. You cut it from its roots. You write it in your own language. You're possessed by the text but you also possess the text. So I would say I'm a vampirized vampire.

*TRANSIT: In your essay on Tawada's work, "Words and Roots," you quote Tawada's statement that whenever she writes in Japanese, she forgets all the German she ever knew, and whenever she begins writing in German again, she must go through a period of relearning the language. How do you experience the movement between the French and German languages during the process of translation? Do you think first in German and then in French?*

BANOUN: That quotation is from "Bodies of Text," one of Tawada's earlier essays, and I think she has undergone an evolution since then. I'm not sure she would say the same thing now. At that time there was a big difference for her between Japanese and German; now I think they exist for her at the same level. She also does something now that she didn't used to do: she translates. She wrote different portions of *The Naked Eye* in each language, and then translated them into the other language to produce complete versions in German and Japanese. She also translated her latest book, *Brother-in-Law in Bordeaux*, into Japanese herself. For me, I would say that when I translate a book, it's not that I think in German, a foreign language, but that each time I have the impression that I'm starting from scratch in my own language. Especially when translating Tawada. I generally need a lot of time, sometimes 20 or 30 pages, in order to find a rhythm or a special relationship to the language of that book. It's something I compare to the process of learning a foreign language: you struggle along for weeks and then one day something clicks and it works. And I experience this with each book.

*TRANSIT: You're also the co-translator of the novel Night Trains with Suspects, which Tawada wrote in Japanese. Could you talk a little bit about the process of translating that book into French? You've said elsewhere that it was a difficult one.*

BANOUN: I translated this book together with Ryoko Sekiguchi, a Japanese woman who lives in France and writes poetry in both Japanese and French. Ryoko first did a very literal translation into French, and then I worked with that. Her translation stayed close to the Japanese structures, and there were many logical things that were not very clear for me. For example, the system of tense is, I believe, very different in Japanese from French or German. Another big problem was the translation of personal pronouns. In Japanese you don't have "I" or "you," but you have different pronouns that you use according to the situation you are in. There was one, *anata*, which is, I think, quite difficult to understand. I considered many possibilities, and also wrote to Yumi Selden, the American translator of Tawada from Japanese into English, and asked other people; the answer was, "Well, it can mean you, he, she, but actually here you should translate the whole book in the infinitive!" I spoke with Yoko too, and we decided to put it in the second person plural, "vous," which some people have said is completely wrong. Anyway, it was a very interesting experience but a difficult process for me. It was difficult because I didn't have command of the original language. I had to ask the Japanese translator how it is, how it sounds in Japanese and then she would explain it, but I had no access to the original. I think the ideal situation for a translator is to work together with a native speaker, but, as far as I'm concerned, I think that both of them have to know the source language and the target language.

*TRANSIT: When you were translating The Naked Eye from German into French, you didn't know which parts of the text had originally been written in German and which parts Tawada had already translated from Japanese into German. Did this affect your translation process? How did you deal with the knowledge that the text had already been mediated by translation?*

BANOUN: Tawada had told me about her bilingual process of writing and translating together. As I understand it, it was a translation, but it was also a work in each language – there was adapting in both directions. To me, the Japanese background of *The Naked Eye* was not very perceptible, I must say, even in the language and the atmosphere, it was less Japanese than, for instance, *Opium for Ovid*. That was partly because of the postcolonial way of approaching Vietnam and French history in the book, which is really part of French or European culture.

*TRANSIT: Regarding The Naked Eye and questions of geopolitics, this book can be read as a postmodern, post-communist, postcolonial novel. It follows a Vietnamese student who comes to Paris via East Berlin and Bochum, and who then experiences the world through the films of Catherine Deneuve, including Indochine. Can you comment on the new meanings that the text acquires when it enters the context of the French language? Has it been read as a postcolonial novel in France?*

BANOUN: Unfortunately, *The Naked Eye* did not receive a lot of attention in the French press; there were some critics interested in it, but the postcolonial aspect was not discussed. In France, the postcolonial debate, especially regarding Vietnam, is not very present. There's a little more discussion about colonization of North Africa. But I think it's a very important aspect of the book, and the figure of Catherine Deneuve plays an important role in this regard as the icon of the French woman, the white woman, and the

object of desire. The book really combines two perspectives: postcolonialism and post-communism. The young girl travels to Paris just before the fall of the Berlin Wall, and then afterwards notices that everything has changed. A very interesting thing about Tawada's geopolitics is the way she combines these changes in the perception of space. I think, especially in France, that people are more conscious of the fall of the Berlin Wall as a reconstruction of space than of postcolonial questions. But at the same time, the work of the French writer Marguerite Duras, who grew up in Vietnam, is beginning to be received in new ways. It's quite recent that French people have become really conscious of postcolonial aspects in her work. Hopefully, this is a debate that will continue to grow.